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SHARING FAITH: VIJAYA'S STORY

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Widowed at 19 with a three year old child: it's not a recipe for happiness in anyone's book, but in a conservative farming village in south India it spells disaster.

In an arrangement pleasing to both families, Vijaya married at 16; pretty normal for the time, and not unusual even today among the remote villages where she lives.

She fell pregnant almost immediately. The marriage was both stable and happy, but a routine operation turned fatal due to the most basic of errors: the medical team didn't cross-match her husband's blood type. Transfused with the wrong blood, he died in hospital.

She had no recourse, no insurance, and no advocacy on her behalf. With her husband dead and dowry gone, she had no savings, no job, and no future.

Widowhood is bad enough anywhere, any time; but in traditional villages like hers, it was almost a death sentence. And until modern times, it often was, *literally*. The centuries long history of *sati*—widow burning, or sometimes live burial—has cast a long shadow. It took over 150 years of reform for the practice to die out; and while it is now a thing of the past (the final, definitive *Sati (Prevention) Act* being made law in 1987), its cultural footprint remains.

For Vijaya—and all widows like her—the future was bleak. She returned to live with her parents in her home village (the only course of action open to her), but there was no welcome from friends and neighbours, no healing embrace into village life; and certainly no prospect of remarriage. Widows were shut away. Isolated, ostracised. Objects of shame more than pity; and even objects of fear. In some villages still, should a widow's face be seen at the start of a journey, the traveller will return home, wash and change his clothes, ritually purify himself and start out afresh, free of the jinx of having glanced at a widow.

Widowhood was a curse, and Vijaya felt its full power.

Vijaya was imprisoned. The grief, bereavement, shame and rejection, had not only stolen her future, but jailed her into secluded existence:

She couldn't leave the house. She was never invited to village celebrations, community events or family gatherings. She could not chat with friends at the market or beside the village well. And she was certainly never invited to any of the extended family's weddings. These all happened on auspicious days throughout the year, as determined by the temple priests. To have a widow attend a wedding would be most inauspicious indeed!

But these things weren't the only cause of her despair. Beyond the cultural and social isolation she was spiritually bereft. Her gods were comfortless, silent and deaf. They offered no relief, provided no hope, and spoke no word of love. Their mask-like images seemed only to mock her pain: after all, according to their world, Vijaya was only reaping what she'd sown in a previous life. Karma couldn't be beaten, it could only be endured.

Vijaya spiralled into depression and suicidal thinking. The external isolation and internal darkness left her both helpless and hopeless. Was this it? For the rest of her life? Why go on?

The pain was too great.

But, unbeknown to her, a resurrection was in the wings.

An elderly Christian woman from a nearby village came to visit. From time to time over the years she had called by to spend time with the family, and now she came again. She was of the same people group, with the same language, and knew firsthand the fish-bowl that was village life. But she was also different. In times past Vijaya and her brother had rankled against her visits. They knew she was a Christian, and didn't want to hear any of her talk about Jesus. They even turned the radio up loud to drown out her voice.

But this time, her presence brought the most precious of all gifts: comfort. She loved. She lived free of the social shaming that dominated the rest of the village. She wasn't frightened by the spectre of being friends with a widow. And she brought messages of hope. Her presence and words meant that God wasn't comfortless, silent and deaf. She spoke his words of love to Vijaya's heart. Light entered the darkness of Vijaya's soul. Hope lifted her spirits. The love of God gently drew her away from the abyss and raised her up to a new life.

In the words and presence of this elderly friend, Jesus made his home with Vijaya. When he comes to a person still, he leaves nothing untouched.

Vijaya and her elder brother both heard and heeded the message that this elderly Christian had brought. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was totally counter-cultural for them to believe in Jesus. There weren't any other Christians in their village, and hardly any in the whole district. Yet, the love of God broke down all their barriers, and they became the first two to believe in him. Why? Because when Jesus came to be with them, he brought all that they didn't have: hope, comfort, joy, love and a future to believe in. And in that power Vijaya crossed the threshold of her family's house—head up and shoulders back—to emerge into the sunlight and share her new found faith and break free of the cultural taboos which had almost killed her.

What's the difference between a flash in the pan and real gold? Real gold is the real thing...it lasts.

Fast forward nearly forty years. In a story too long to tell, and perhaps too unbelievable for our ears, Vijaya and her brother, Jes-Paul, still live in the same village. But now they are not the only Christians there. Indeed, throughout their district about 30 village churches have been founded because of their ministry. There is also a children's home (one of the finest in the whole of south India); a sewing school for village women who have no other means of income; material and practical support for widows; disaster relief for village families; education for village children; training for village pastors; and a growing testimony to the fact that whole societies can be transformed by the presence of the love of God.

It's not been plain sailing by any means. There has been plenty of suffering, no little persecution—including a bomb attack on a Christian meeting in which Vijaya was seriously wounded—and lots of roadblocks along the way. But the foundation laid by that elderly Christian visitor all those years ago has never been shaken.

How do I know all this? Because they are my friends. I have been in their homes many times. I have seen and heard all that God has done. I met Vijaya's son when I was teaching at University College in the UK. He had won a scholarship to study there, and now—despite holding multiple university degrees and a Ph.D. from one of the UK's best universities—he and his wife and family, together with Vijaya still live in the same village, sharing the love of God with their friends and neighbours, serving with the love of God who has loved them.

This sort of resurrection is not just for them. Thanks be to God, it is for us all!

For more about the work that Vijaya's family is doing to support vulnerable people in India call us on 1800 353 350 for a copy of India Village Ministries newsletter

If you'd like to support this work financially email the India Village Ministries (Australia) at: ivmaustralia@gmail.com

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